

Snoqualmie Valley Record

Beyond the bus: Could transit options change for Lower Valley in SVT-Metro deal?

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February 4, 2013 · 11:24 AM

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Zachary Burns waits for the Route 224 bus at Carnation's Bird Street stop. Route 224 serves Fall City, Carnation and Duvall, but suffers from low ridership. King County Metro Transit is considering alternatives to buses on this connector. / CAROL LADWIG/STAFF PHOTO

The Route 922 bus doesn't come through any more. It was never perfect, but David Egan still misses it.

A 26-year resident of this neighborhood west of Carnation, Egan has been "pretty much totally blind" for most his life. He doesn't drive, and that's made him beholden—more than he'd like—to his family and neighbors for rides.

"You always feel like you have to make it right for people," Egan says. So, if he doesn't want to ask around for a ride, there's public transit—if and when he can get it.

When Route 922 was canceled three years ago, Egan and his neighbors had one less public transit option. The changes continued.

Last October, facing budget cuts, Snoqualmie Valley Transportation cut its dial-a-ride service in the Lower Valley, including Ames Lake.

Now, King County Metro Transit is taking a hard look at the options and economics of its Valley routes. The fixed route between Duvall and Fall City may end up going—or evolving.

"The ideal situation for people here, including myself," Egan says, "would be to have Metro contract with Snoqualmie Valley Transportation to run dial-a-ride service" to and from Ames Lake.

Such service is a possibility—if not for Ames Lake, then for neighbors along Highway 203. If talks now under way continue, some Lower Valley residents might be boarding a Metro-funded, SVT-driven bus in the distant future. That's one of several options, ranging from contracts to van pools, being discussed as Metro reconsiders the Valley's transit picture.

New shapes

King County Metro Transit is nearing the terminus of a five-month process to shape future transportation services in the Valley.

"It's an opportunity to do things differently, and make things better, for people who ride, and people who don't," says Matt Hansen, Metro's supervisor for market development.

When the King County Council approved Metro's Strategic Plan for Public Transportation in 2011, the council charged the transit agency with finding ways to run more efficiently. Last September, the county adopted Metro's Five Year Plan for Alternative Services.

Now, Metro is finalizing a proposal, to be put out in early February, for a demonstration project in the Valley that deploys new ideas that go beyond fixed-route buses.

"What the county council told us to do was spend our money more effectively," Hansen said. "We have two goals: provide mobility at a lower cost and save money."

Most Valley routes have healthy ridership, but one Lower Valley stretch in particular is a low-performer, and may see change.

"We think we're going to put in something better," says Hansen.

The Valley is one of four test areas, including Vashon Island, Redmond, and southeast King County between Enumclaw and Maple Valley, for transit alternatives to be tried in the next four years.

Once the new Metro plan is finished, the agency will send it out to the public and stakeholders, hold public meetings, and then submit an ordinance for approval by King County Council.

Metro's hope is to build these alternatives into its standard toolkit, says Hansen.

The routes

The busiest local bus, Route 209, which connects Snoqualmie and North Bend to the Issaquah Transit Center with 28 trips a day, is safe. On average, 130 people get on the 209 daily between the North Bend Park and Ride and Preston.

"That tells us it's pretty good usage," Hansen says. "Any time you're talking about 150 people a day, in this environment, it's pretty good. That's a big number of people to inconvenience."

Route 215, a peak-only route that connects North Bend, Snoqualmie and Snoqualmie Ridge to Issaquah with five trips, carries about 90 people daily.

"The 215's doing fine," Hansen says. A long-term objective, he added, is to increase service in the growing areas of the Valley, including the Ridge.

But King County's Route 224 is not so healthy.

This route, which terminates at Fall City and connects that community with Carnation, Duvall and Redmond, runs every hour and a half on peak times, picks up about 30 people daily between Fall City and Carnation, with another 10 in Duvall.

Metro surveyed riders of routes 209 and 224, and found that people use the bus mainly for work and school, but also for shopping and errands for medical trips. Riders put a priority on the bus getting them to the same places they ride to, today. Secondary priorities were to have fares stay the same, and then to improve the frequency of routes. Riders also seek more service on weekends.

The 224 run between Fall City and Carnation, says Hansen, "costs a lot of money and doesn't carry a lot of people."

Currently, Route 224 costs about \$28 per ride. That's substantially more than the average of \$5 per rider across Metro.

"Ultimately, we're going to contract to provide that service at a lower cost," says Hansen. Snoqualmie Valley Transportation is being looked at as that contractor.

SVT's role

BJ Libby, SVT's executive director, said her agency is interested in working with the county. Who else would be better suited? Libby asks.

"We need transportation in the Valley, Upper and Lower, desperately," she told the Record. "I know people are counting on us. I'd love to accept the challenge, if it comes about."

“We’d have to have funding,” Libby added.

Financially, the Valley transit agency is holding the line after last fall’s route cuts. The group is in frequent meetings about resources with Valley cities, and recently received funding from the Snoqualmie Tribal Council.

With six drivers and four vans, SVT is ready to hire more drivers. Libby says she has several strong candidates, and also has a number of ideas about how best to grow the service, including Saturday trips. But revenues need to be there for any expansion.

METRO currently provides Snoqualmie Valley Transportation with about \$42,000 a year in funding to ensure youth and low-income access to transit.

SVT has been fully involved in the future-shaping process, says Hansen. Linking SVT with Metro would have its complexities.

“When you operate as Metro, you’ve got to have a fare box, you’ve got to have an ORCA reader, you’ve got to have transfers that are compatible with the rest of Metro,” Hansen said. “That’s a whole level of complexity that you’ll have to work out. The service has got to be open to the general public.”

“We know how to do this,” he added. “We just have to have a new partner be up to speed.”

Hansen spelled out how cut to Route 224 would free up dollars for other services. Such options could include van-pools or a community van, parked at Carnation, where qualified, volunteer drivers could take people to the local food bank, Costco, or take Boy Scouts on trips.

In Lake Alice, where Egan lives, Metro has been interested in starting some ride-share programs. That’s being done independently from the latest alternatives, says Hansen.

Between Hopelink, Mount Si Senior Center and the Sno-Valley Senior Center, Metro partners with a number of agencies operating in the Lower Valley. Hansen sees possibilities there, with partners growing a better “spine” of transit that could ultimately help residents of places like Ames Lake

“We need to look at how all these different service partners coordinate, so that we get the best use of all resources in the Valley,” he said.

David’s ride

Today, if Egan wants to get to town for his job managing rental properties, and not trouble his friends and neighbors for a lift, he uses Metro’s Access Transportation Service.

Access, which uses vans to provide rides for people with disabilities, requires at least a day’s notice. Egan then waits, in the elements, on his road for the van. A short wait is five minutes. A long wait is an hour.

“I’m glad it’s there, and I’m thankful for it,” he says. “It’s better than nothing.” But it’s far from ideal “for guys like me that have to be in different places and at different times.”

Egan believes his Ames Lake community still wants and needs bus service. He or his neighbors have reached out to the bus agencies in the past, for example, pushing to get SVT to expand service to their neighborhood.

“We’ve had so many false hopes and so many tries at it,” Egan said. He attended a public meeting, held by Metro last November in Fall City, to look for options.

“I was hoping Metro would be receptive to working with Snoqualmie Valley Transit,” perhaps with a dial-a-ride service for a start.

Egan accepts that most people take travel for granted. He can't.

The old fixed-route 922 bus offered him the most independence, but it wasn't without its problems. The route never had strong ridership.

“Seven riders were regulars,” Egan said. “Some days it was just me.”

For years, he caught the bus early, around 6 a.m., and caught the return route home 12 hours later.

To Egan, there are pros to public transit. One, you don't have to deal with car costs like parking and gas.

“You meet a lot of nice people,” he says. “To keep bringing people together makes sense.”

“Most people have never ridden a bus,” Egan says. But for those who rely on it, transit is vital.

Whether through age, illness or life changes, “Any person can be without the ability to drive, at any time,” he says. “If you have the option of transit, you're not going to be as devastated.”



Seth Truscott/Staff Photo

David Egan and his service dog, Wekota, wait for the Access van up the hill from his Ames Lake home. Egan, who is blind, is an advocate for public transit in his neighborhood.